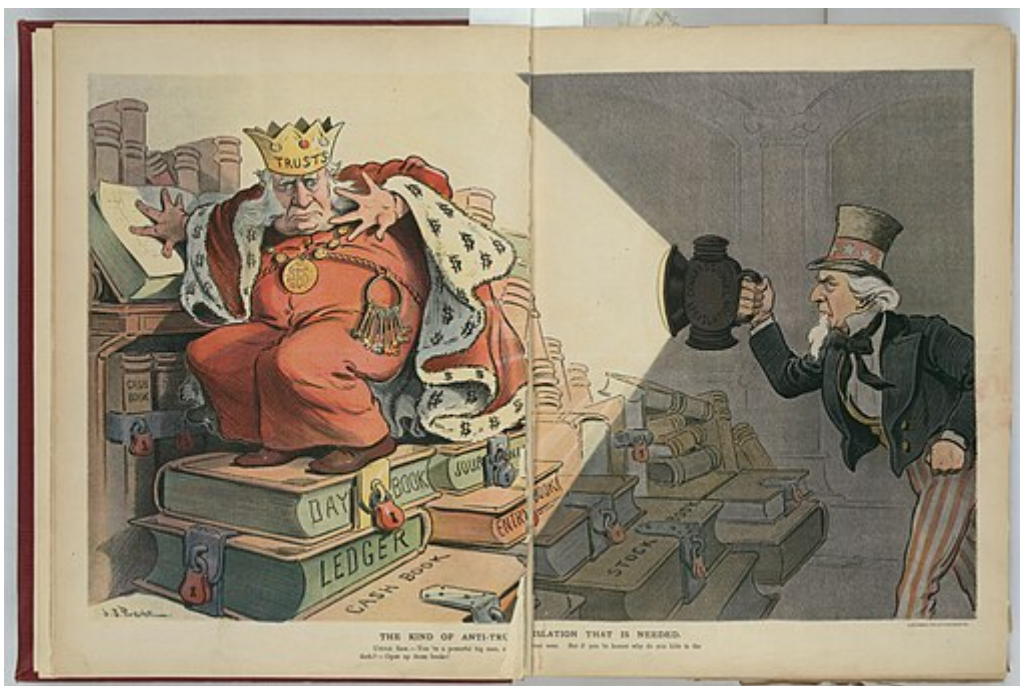


OP-EDS

THE EXIT FROM AMAZON IS A DOUBLE-CLICK AWAY

OCTOBER 3, 2023 | JOEL SCHLOSBERG | 0 COMMENTS



Puck's J.S. Puck envisioned government shining a light on trusts, when its suppression of price signals is what keeps them in the dark. Public domain.

Does the author of *Little Brother* love Big Brother?

Probably not. Still, the Cory Doctorow calling for “restoring the enforcement program of the federal government” (“[The Second-Best Time to Slay Amazon is Now](#),” *The New York Times*, September 29) seems to have forgotten what he learned ... and taught.

Little Brother is one of Doctorow's sci-fi novels, but its grassroots uprising against the Department of Homeland Security was modeled after, and unashamedly presented as a role model for, real-life push-back to the post-9/11 surveillance state. Its introduction includes nonfictional denunciations of the NSA and TSA. Yet Doctorow entrusts the DOJ to fight the threat of two-day shipping rather than terrorism.

Doctorow does concede that Amazon profits from “vast sums in subsidies from state and local governments,” though the prolific documenter of intellectual property abuse misses the chance to highlight its indirect subsidy. Apple paid to license Amazon’s “1-Click” checkout patent, sparing iTunes customers a redundant second mouse mash, after Barnes & Noble not doing so for its website got them sued.

Doctorow sees cyberspace, unmoored from “constraints of empires grounded in physical goods,” as ripe for canny cornering. A decade ago, *Times* contributor [Adam Davidson](#) failed to foresee the rise of streaming services that avoided “the cost of digging up roads and sidewalks and hiring a fleet of technicians to draw wire” in building alternatives to cable television.

The remainder of Doctorow’s account of Amazon’s rise stresses sheer monetary muscle, using “seemingly bottomless coffers” to “extinguish any upstart that dared to compete with it,” aided by Ronald Reagan’s replacement of a “suspicion of corporate power” with deregulation of the Progressive Era’s antitrust regime.

In fact, as historian Gabriel Kolko explained in *The Triumph of Conservatism*, “the major demands of politically oriented big businessmen” were what “gave progressivism its essential character.” Doctorow calls for Joe Biden to reverse the “decline since the Carter administration” of trust-busting. Reagan actually halted the steps towards rolling back regulations that entrenched incumbent industries [spearheaded by the previous president and assisted by Biden in Congress](#). Even the most over-the-top pro-finance pop culture of Reagan’s terms, like the cinematic comedies *Trading Places* and *The Secret of My Succe\$s*, championed the leeway for nimble outsiders to outpace the old-money establishment.

The Doctorow who writes that “sellers became increasingly reliant on Amazon to display and deliver their goods” over the first decades of the 2000s is the same one who garners publicity, and sales, by providing free downloads of books [such as *Little Brother*](#).

On the consumer side, Amazon’s “captive base of readers” has an open door. Prime’s bountiful buffet of services may seem unbeatable, but I let my subscription lapse when it just didn’t offer enough for the price, and the time required to navigate its disorganized offerings, that couldn’t be obtained elsewhere. Removing the ability to play album tracks in order was the last straw.

The federal government Doctorow champions as the opponent of Amazon’s “calcified edifice of expensively purchased pro-monopoly precedent” is a far more extensive, and costly, monopolist.

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